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ABSTRACT

Finding meaning in an ordinary prose text and following a description or argument is generally considered less difficult than finding the essential message in a literary text. Sometimes, however, the emotional impact makes it easier for some readers with some texts to see and understand the meaning of some literary texts. Research from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) suggests that differences in comprehension between high- and low-achieving students are much less in literature than in reading comprehension. Other studies showing declines in reading comprehension over time do not indicate corresponding declines in results for literature. A student may be aware that a literary work has affected him or her emotionally in some way, but may not be able to say how. The student's understanding of the text has been achieved through a synthetic, seemingly effortless grasp of the words' impact, rather than through an analytic approach. Studies suggest that despite age, education, and reading experience differences, differing groups of readers have similar abilities to create meanings early in the reading process, and to organize and observe these meanings. But groups differ when asked to describe or interpret literary works. Synthetic and incompletely verbalized understandings run the risk of being overlooked in teaching and in research. (Four figures are included.) (SG)

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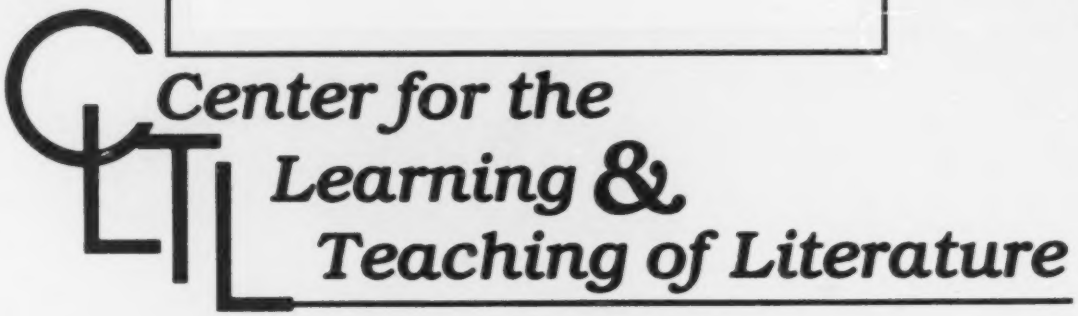
Reading and Understanding Literature

Gunnar Hansson



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Reading and Understanding Literature

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Report Series 4.5

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Reading and Understanding Literature

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Making out the plain sense of an ordinary prose text, and thus following a description or a line of argument, is generally considered to be less difficult than seeing the implied meanings and finding the essential message in a literary text. Although this opinion can certainly be justified, it is still a matter of interest to consider the opposite possibility: when the implied meanings, the unifying tone or the emotional impact as a matter of fact make it easier - for some readers, with some texts - to see and understand the meaning of a literary text. When such cases occur, as they do in both practical teaching and empirical research, they provide insights into the kinds of difficulties which readers meet in literary texts, and into the strategies which readers use when they create and organize meanings.

Another common opinion, often advocated by teachers of literature, is that a reader who maintains that he or she has understood a text but cannot say much about what this understanding is, should not be taken seriously. Meanings which cannot be described and verbalized have not been understood, runs the standard argument. But if we can discern different levels or stages in the processes where readers consecutively produce, structure, analyze and describe meanings in texts, then forms of understanding other than the fully verbalized ones should perhaps be accepted - particularly so if the readers themselves regard them as rewarding and valuable reading experiences that have a strong personal impact. Discerning such levels or stages in the reading process also implies that we may recognize various kinds of difficulties: for instance, difficulties in organizing meanings which a reader has produced will differ from the difficulties he or she has in verbalizing and communicating these meanings.

In this paper I shall consider these questions, and some others related to them. And I shall do so by viewing them in the light of results from empirical research on the reading process. Such results are often useful material to think with - not because they make thinking more productive, but rather because they help to keep thinking closer to basic facts and processes.

Literature and Ordinary Prose

If some of the Swedish data from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in Reading Comprehension and Literature are calculated as percentile values, as they are in Figure 1, some thought provoking differences between the understanding of literary texts and the understanding of ordinary prose texts are brought out.

These IEA data were collected in 1970 (Purves, 1973; Thorndike, 1973; Hansson, 1975). The degree or level of understanding among 14- and 18-year-old students was registered by a well-tried out instrument, using series of multiple choice questions. In the Reading Comprehension part of the study the texts were of ordinary prose type: informative, explanatory or descriptive texts for instance, of a kind which is regularly found in school books. In the literature part, the texts were short stories written by established authors. They were

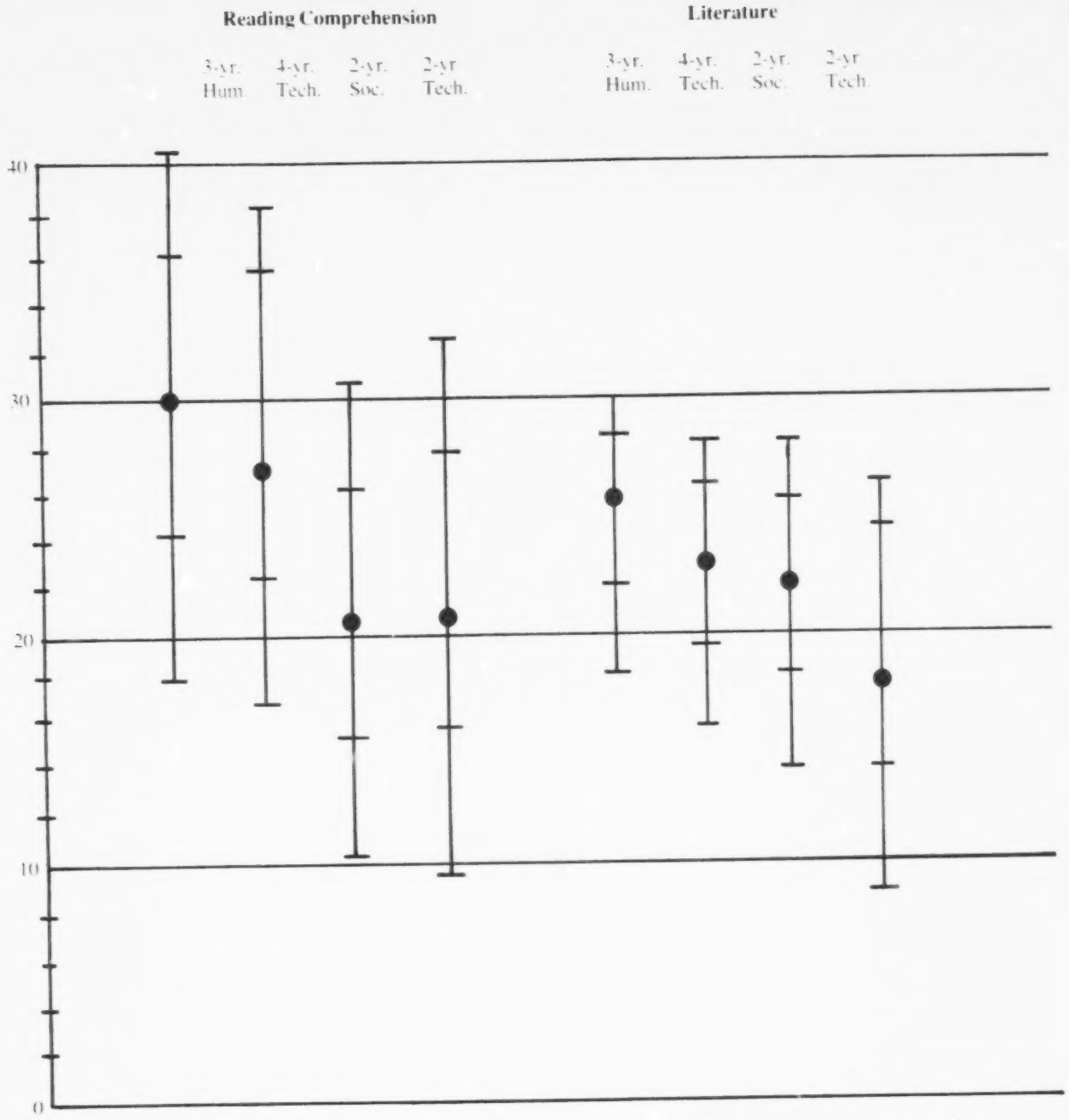
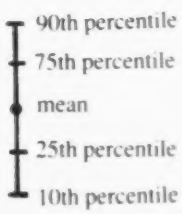


Figure 1. Percentile values, Reading Comprehension and Literature, Swedish students 18 years, IEA 1970.



supposed to be unknown to the students but of a kind which might be studied in a literature course. Only the results for the 18-year-old population are discussed here. Results are shown for four of the three-year lines and for the four-year technical line of the Swedish gymnasium school. These lines are normally chosen by students who want to continue their education on the university level. Results are also shown for some of the two-year gymnasium lines normally leading more directly into various professions in society.

One thing that becomes evident in Figure 1 is that the difference between high- and low-achieving students is much less in literature than in reading comprehension. This is certainly not an expected result: most teachers of Mother Tongue would readily describe their experiences of students having great difficulties with literary texts but no or few difficulties with ordinary prose texts. To some extent, this difference in the results may be due to the measuring instrument, the potential scale being more compressed in the literature test, for instance. Undoubtedly, however, the difference also depends on more or less divergent processes in the reading and interpretation of the two kinds of texts. Further evidence for such conclusions is provided by a later study (Spenke, 1982). The data for this study were collected in 1976, i.e., six years after the IEA data were collected. The same measuring instruments were used, and students from the same lines of the gymnasium school were included in the population of 1976.

In Figure 2 some of the results from the 1976 investigation have been placed "in front of" the corresponding results from the original IEA study in 1970, in order to facilitate comparisons. Most striking is that the reading comprehension results from 1976 are so much below the corresponding results from 1970. This applies to all percentile levels, but it is particularly so for the weaker students and for students on the two-year lines. On the whole, the difference or *distance* between high- and low-achieving students has also increased considerably in a short period of only six years. This indicates a severe drop in the general reading ability among Swedish students, who are leaving the gymnasium school, either to start a university education or to enter working life. In itself, this ought to be something to observe for teachers of all subjects and on all levels of the Swedish educational system, since the ability to understand ordinary prose texts is a prerequisite for every kind of study, as well as for taking part in all kinds of activities and processes in a modern democratic society. Therefore, the results should also be a reminder for school administrators and politicians, who have a responsibility for the Swedish school system.

Another striking thing in Figure 2 is, however, that there is no corresponding severe drop in the literature results. On some gymnasium lines there is a drop, to be sure, but to some extent this drop is out-weighted by improved results on other lines. Furthermore, the drop affects the better part of the students at least as much as the weaker part, and the *distance* between high- and low-achieving students is rather less in 1976 than it was in 1970. This is certainly not what people in general would have expected, and least of all perhaps what most teachers of Mother Tongue would have expected. A common line of argument, even among teachers, would most probably be that students who find it difficult and in many cases fail to understand descriptive, explanatory and other kinds of ordinary prose texts, would most often find it even more difficult to understand literary texts with their implied meanings and subtle overtones. And yet the results which are demonstrated in Figure 2 clearly indicate that this is not the case - that instead people with less reading experience and training (two-year lines) and lower general reading proficiency (low-achieving students) can find it easier to create, structure, and organize meanings when reading literary texts than when reading ordinary prose texts.

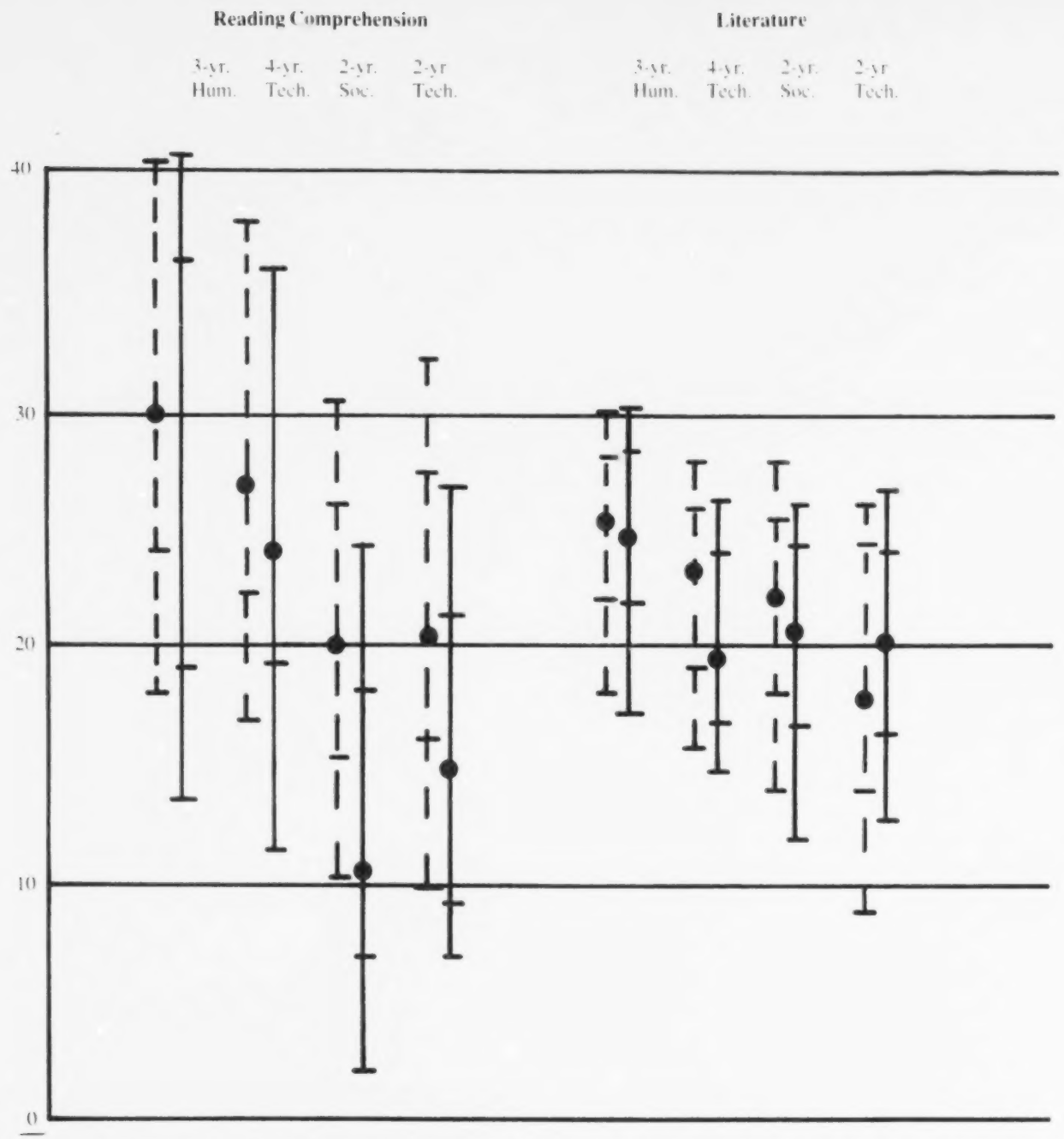


Figure 2. Percentile values, Reading Comprehension and Literature, Swedish students 18 years, IEA 1970 and Spenke 1976.

It should be emphasized here that these results, in literature as well as in reading comprehension, were obtained with instruments using a range of multiple choice questions. The students were then asked to select from or evaluate four preformulated answers to each of the questions. One of the four answers was regarded as the *expected* answer, which means that the researchers when constructing the instruments regarded it as more reasonable or in some sense *better* than the other three answers. These expectations were then checked and to some extent modified in pretests, before the main data collection took place. Choosing among such preformulated answers is certainly a different and perhaps also an easier task than when students have to produce their own answers or write *protocols* with full descriptions and analyses of the meanings of texts which they have read. This latter aspect of the meaning producing process will be discussed further on.

However, if it does occur - as it evidently did in the investigations using the IEA instruments - that literary texts are in some ways easier to understand than ordinary prose texts, then the question whether there are any plausible explanations arises of why this is so. Is there any further empirical evidence available to substantiate such explanations? Would such explanations have any consequences for the way teachers and researchers are looking upon *understanding* literary texts, or for the way we are looking upon the question of difficulties in people's understanding of literary texts?

Immediate Understandings

In research on response to literature using the *protocol* method, whether in written or oral form, readers often make statements to the effect that the poem or story has made a strong and profound impact, although the reader cannot say very much about what the impact is or what the significant meaning of the text is. In my own research, particularly with some texts or with some groups of readers, I have often found statements like the following: "It makes a great impact on me, and I have a sense that it deals with very essential matters, but I can't explain what it is"; "It moves me deeply, and I can follow the meaning of the words line for line, but the total meaning of the text evades me, or I can't find words enough to describe it." The researcher when handling the protocols, as well as the teacher in his classroom, often finds himself at a loss as to what to do with these reactions since they do not lend themselves to further analysis, little informative as they are. The researcher may have to put them aside, calling them *unclassifiable* or *miscellaneous*, while the teacher finds his analytic efforts being better rewarded in communications with students who have acquired a more developed descriptive and critical language.

Sometimes, however, and particularly if the research design is such that the readers report on their understanding of the text on two or more occasions in the experimental situation, there will be more information available about what the readers felt, grasped, or *understood* in their initial readings. Several ways to obtain such consecutive reports have been used, in my own investigations as well as in those carried out by others. Teaching sessions, group discussions, background information about the text or about its author, and textual analyses of different kinds are some examples of means that have been introduced after the initial reading and the writing of the first report. This report has then been followed by a second report, or sometimes by several consecutive reports.

To illustrate this process I shall present in translation from Swedish some protocols from one of my own investigations (Hansson, 1959). (In translating, the protocols appear somewhat more fluent then they do in the original Swedish.) The readers I quote were university students of literature or of psychology, and also 18-year-old students in the gymnasium school. Male and female readers are about equally represented. In order to make statements and references in the quotations from the protocols somewhat more comprehensible, all the illustrations except two are taken from readings of one poem, a condensed and suggestive piece of poetry in the modernistic tradition. It was written by Gunnar Ekelöf, one of the leading Swedish poets, and was first published in 1934. It is called "Autumn Magic" (or Autumn sejd, seid being a word for a specific Norse kind of magic, known from old Islandic writings. It was practiced by a man or a woman, sitting on a high stool delivering dark and often threatening messages. It could be used for instance to prophesy the future, to avert disaster, or to inflict damage on other people.) The poem is presented here in a verbatim translation:

Autumn Magic

Be quiet, be silent and wait,
wait for the wild beast, wait for the foreboding that shall come,
wait for the wonder, wait for the destruction that shall come
when time has got insipid.
It shall soar with stars put out, passing blazing skerries.
It shall come at dawn or at dusk.
Day or night shall not be its time.
When the sun sets in dust and the moon in stone it shall come
with stars put out on charred ships ...
Then the bloody doors shall be opened for everything possible.
Then the bloodless doors shall be closed for ever.
The ground shall be filled with unseen steps and the air with unheard sounds,
the towns shall fall down on time like strokes of the clock,
the shells of the ears shall burst like deep in the water
and time's immeasurable meekness shall be perpetuated
deep down in dead eyes, in dull lights
by the wonder that touches upon their houses.
Be quiet, be silent and wait,
breathless until dawn opens its eye and breathless
until dusk closes its look.

In some cases the readers indicated already in their first reports that they had a fairly clear idea of their understanding, although they were vague about the *meaning* in a more limited sense. This is illustrated in the following quotation from a protocol written by a student of psychology:

> The poem creates a feeling of coldness and unpleasantness. One is surrounded by darkness and gloominess. Dark colors and wide, dark waters appear in one's consciousness.... At the first reading, the poem gives an impression of confusion and emptiness. I feel restless. There are symbolic meanings, and I feel like having nothing to take hold of, nothing to stick to. My thoughts have no foothold. Acoustic and visual images come in rapid succession and are just as rapidly stopped. There is agitation in my consciousness.

This reader certainly had some understanding of the structuring and totality of the poem as he read it, although he could not go very far in describing and analyzing his understanding. In other similar cases the first report indicates that the reader has tried to find and describe a more intellectualized meaning, beyond a strongly felt structural unity of other qualities. The following report from a female university student is one of many such examples:

> The soft rhythm, the alliterations, the repetitions and the assonances are combined into a unity which creates a light feeling of pleasure.... I have difficulties finding the meaning in it; somehow I resist analyzing and taking to pieces (probably because I lack training and knowledge). But the feeling it creates, beside the experience of its language, is a strange mixture of fear and longing. Destruction and miracle are there at the same time. The light atmosphere of waiting dominates on the whole.

After the first report this reader was presented with an analysis of the poem. In the analysis many details of the text were connected with various phenomena of the everyday world (World War II, the Bible), and the intellectual meaning and structuring of the text was described. The reader then gratefully accepted the statements in the analysis as the meaning of the poem as she had understood it in her first reading: "Yes, now the poem has got its so-called meaning, which I was looking for previously." Her statement, and similar statements by other readers in the same situation, should be taken to indicate that there is a level of understanding which precedes or perhaps is below or beside that kind of intellectual understanding which can be fully described in words and thus communicated to other people. This is perhaps even more clearly demonstrated in such cases where the readers, having the same kind of clearly felt or *seen* but to some extent unformulated initial experience, do not accept the interpretation which is presented to them later on. Such cases are also quite common; the following quotation, also from a female university student, is one example from the same investigation and relating to the same poem:

> Wonderful, suggestive rhythm which is strengthened by the alliterations. The rhythm in itself transmits an atmosphere of trembling expectation. The poem makes a very strong impression through its rapid heightening to a crescendo ... which is then falling to quiet peace. I think it is symbolizing every great, purifying, revolutionary event, and also the greatness of what is small, seemingly unimportant and commonplace. What is important is less what the words mean than their tone together.... Purging and revival. Death or birth. Life itself, the mystery of growth. You can see biblical influences, both in the choice of words and in the poem's mixture of feelings of disaster and blissful expectation. But I think that what is essential in the poem, what it expresses, is an awe-inspiring exultation over the greatness of life. The mixture of words from the most different areas arises long rows of associations and is the reason why I cannot find in the poem more - or less - than a general, probably why I find the poem so beautiful, apart from the rhythm and the fine harmony of the words.

An all-embracing feeling, the perceived rhythm of the poem as the reading proceeds, the *tone* of the words together more than their *meaning*, are basic qualities of this first reading of the text. And yet, when this particular reader was presented with an analysis of the poem, an analysis in which the *meaning* of the poem was discussed in more discursive terms than the reader had done, it turned out that she had a clear and distinct view of what the poem did mean and what it didn't. She started to argue about the descriptions and interpretations

presented in the analysis and put forward a number of reservations and qualifications: the basic feeling is not fearful waiting but fearful expectation, autumn is not only a time for corruption but also for purification, it is followed by winter with rest and peace before a new spring, etc.

Readings and interpretations like the ones I have illustrated here are often looked down upon or even dismissed by teachers, critics, and literary theorists: they are said to be too vague, too *emotional*, too little concerned with the *meaning* of the text, too little related to the actual wording and structuring of the text. Such attitudes are questionable, particularly from a researcher's point of view, but also in many teaching situations. There are, as is already indicated by the few examples I have given, many such readings which are neither vague nor particularly *emotional*. On the contrary, they are often quite advanced understandings of the poems, although they have been less intellectualized and less put into the kind of discursive terms and analytical phrases which teachers and critics have been taught to use. The lack of this analytic-discursive dimension in a report or protocol does not necessarily imply vagueness in the understanding or excessively emotional qualities in the reading. The often very strong expressions of personal involvement and appreciation, which are quite common ingredients in these reports, may just as well be taken to indicate preciseness in the understanding. At least in my own experience of empirical research, any collection of reports from a group of readers - young or old, with high or low education - will contain much evidence of such readings with strong personal involvement but less intellectual analysis and description.

One feature of these readings is that the understanding of the text has been reached through a synthetic, immediate, and seemingly almost effortless grasp of the total impact of the words. This approach to the text often means *listening* to the words, images, and associations and finding in them a total configuration, which is then described as the meaning, the impact, the personal and often very valuable experience of the text. In many cases such readings bring the literary experience quite close to the experience of a piece of music, and it is not unusual for readers to use descriptive words with explicit or implicit references to music:

> Cheerfully inviting, eager and fussy, mildly singing, the author's exclamations are crowding together.... Somewhat abruptly comes this philosophical thought after all the practical cares, comes like the last tunes of a small melody softly dying away.

> First I was deeply moved by the suggestive, silently intensive opening.... Then the mood suddenly reversed, I have an impression of piercingly, strong and clear movements.... Finally comes - like repetition and reminding of the meek mood in the first part - the final line which rounds off the poem like the resting final chord on the keynote in a piece of music.

In other cases the synthetic experience is of a more *dramatic* kind, described by the readers themselves as movements or configurations in their minds, sometimes light and pleasing, sometimes strong and even threatening, as is illustrated in these reports from two 18-year-old students:

> It makes me vibrate deep down - in the beginning lightly, then more strongly. The climax is reached with "the ground shall be filled with ...". Then the mood is passing over into the mysterious and breathless.... The conflicting elements create a mysterious feeling, difficult to describe.

> To me it was as if something that had been forgotten for a long time, for thousands of years, rose and responded within me. My normal, coldly calculating being stood beside, powerless against this primeval grey.... Everything, absolutely everything is revoked, I think it is something fantastic, my mind reels, I want to scream but cannot, only wait, wait. But after this stormy climax, a few soft final chords follow.

In other cases the unifying element may be a different kind of movement, the reader having an impression of being moved from one scene to another during the process of reading, and ending up in a coherent experience which is felt to be strongly valuable and loaded with meaning. Such is the case in the following report, which relates to a poem describing a light summer night with streaks of mist moving to and fro:

> This part creates an on-looker. Now I am not "taking part" in the action any more.... The scene is suddenly swept clean ... now all is visible again ... now again I am brought in among the misty figures.... It is as if everything is dissolved into nothing, or into a light *wind*, and I have a strong impression of infinity, and of my own smallness.

Such understandings are vague only in the sense that they do not go very far in analytic descriptions of the detailed meanings and the structuring of such meanings. In another sense, however, they need not be vague at all, since the readers often have very clear ideas of both the central import and the structuring of their reading:

> The composition of the poem is simple and logical. The first and last lines create a frame and provide the basic atmosphere of the vision of destruction, which forms the center and climax of the poem. ... The poem creates in me as reader the same feeling as when I am watching a slowly rising wave, it rises higher and higher and then collapses, and then slowly withdraws again.

Readings of this kind are often saturated with personal feelings and values which, as the preceding examples have shown, stand out very clearly in the minds of the readers themselves, both as to their essential meaning and as to their form and structure. Perhaps as a result of previous teaching or other experiences of the same kind, many readers are also eager to defend their own subtle understanding and to protect it from outside influence, as is illustrated in the following report, written by an 18-year-old girl:

> The destruction is described vaguely, but it is strongly moving. I don't know what constitutes it, perhaps a war or the Day of Judgment. But, I don't care if nobody tells me about this. The mood of the poem is so moving and harrowing and elusive, so perhaps it would be demolished if it was analyzed. The poem is so unspeakably beautiful in its choice of words and expressions and seems so balanced and clear, despite the fact that I don't understand everything in it. Alliterations, repetitions of words and other artistic devices make a strong impression on me.... The poem does not consist of word combinations without sense, I perceive the coherence so strongly, although it is elusive.

It is easy to imagine that synthetic understandings of this kind sometimes touch upon deeply personal layers of experience, which are not confined to what is regarded as aesthetically pleasing or even bearable. The insights that are beginning to take shape in the reading, or the configuration of what is moving around in the reader's mind during the reading process, may be

disturbing or even threatening. Such insights, more or less clearly apprehended, are also a kind of understanding, however - an understanding that the reader may try to avoid, prevent, get away from or simply hide by choosing divergent lines to rationalize an interpretation.

Many or most such threatening understandings probably pass unnoticed, both by the teacher and by the researcher. More conspicuous cases will be noticed, however. In my own experience from several investigations there have been some cases which clearly illustrate these kind of reactions among readers. I shall give just one example, provided by a young man studying psychology at the university. The poetry reading session was included as part of the regular psychology course, where it was intended to provide insights into problems in giving introspective reports. Thus, the students were expected to finish the task, and ample time was allowed. The student was disturbed already after his first glancing through the text:

> What the hell is the poet trying to frighten us with! This test person's *personality* reacts most strongly and emotionally against this. A parallel with my childhood's horror dreams of the world's destruction is immediate. (Some time at the age of 8 or 9 I came across a religious brochure from some sect. On the cover of it there was a picture of the world's destruction. This occupied my thoughts very much up to the age of about 16, when a kind of scientific relativism helped me against this horror.) ... But why choose such atrocities as this one! Such a poem (hell, I don't want to call such a thing poetry), surely it would suffice with less mentally unhealthy pieces than this one.... This test person was so utterly frustrated after the first perusal of the produce that he didn't want to look at it any more. Everything offers resistance.... But now I am looking at the paper again, and I *can not* go on reading it.

On some level this man certainly had reached an understanding of the poem, an understanding that could not be very detailed or intellectually analyzed, but that was clear enough for him to realize that he had better stay away from further reading and further analysis. He also used all kinds of maneuvers to get away from the assigned task - some of them are visible in the quotation, while others are not. The person administering the session was for instance abused several times, since he was said to be the cause of the reader's unpleasant situation.

Synthetic and Analytic Readings

One common feature with the kind of readings and understandings which I have illustrated here is that they are formed quite *early* in the reading process. Often the readers report that they had a clear idea of the significant meaning, or that they strongly felt the essential import of the poem already at the very first reading. Such understandings are rarely reported after much probing or hard thinking with repeated readings - most often they are there quickly and easily, or not at all.

Another common feature is that the readers have reached their understanding by a synthetic approach to the texts: not by some kind of analytic effort, looking at the meaning of isolated words, images or symbols, or at formal elements, structural arrangements and such things, but by grasping a total configuration, a unifying tone or an expressive movement. Details are always less important than the totality and unity of the experience. Seemingly the unity of the experience has been there almost effortlessly, as an immediate product of the mind

following the words and lines of the poem, seeing the connections between them and feeling them organized into a unity expressing essential truths.

A third feature is that most of these readers, when they have arrived at or created such experiences, are quite happy with their interpretation and understanding of the poems. Most of them openly declare that they have no wish to be more specific about the meaning of the poem, no need to analyze it further into details or to find out about possible references to various things and phenomena of the outer world. In their reading the references of the poems are to inner realities, dimensions, and qualities, and to personal values. Some of them do accept suggestions or statements about references to outward realities, about more intellectualized meanings, or about structural configurations in these meanings. But they seldom need them, and few find them helpful in a deeper sense of the word. Others decline such suggestions, or even object to them, because they find them disturbing or upsetting to the subtle balance in their own reading.

Processes and qualities of the kinds I have illustrated are dominant in many reading and understandings. Naturally, they vary with different kinds of poems - some inviting them, others hardly allowing them. And above all, they vary with the readers: some readers seem to prefer such understandings as often as the texts allow them, while other readers seldom or never are content with anything less than a detailed and complete analytic understanding. It is very likely, however, that elements of the kind I have discussed are to some extent present in many or most readings of texts which are generally regarded as literary texts. Elements of this kind may even be among the basic ingredients in the much discussed *literariness* of such texts. Even if many readers favor more analytic approaches to the texts and want to reach understandings which can be described in discursive and analytic terms, their readings may be permeated, supported, and structured by what is often - but not always very adequately - called *emotional* qualities.

The presence and the structuring power of such qualities may also be an essential part in the explanation of the differences in the understanding of literary and ordinary prose texts, which were demonstrated in the first part of this paper. The drop in the IEA results from 1970 to 1976 (Figure 2) was much less conspicuous in literature than in reading comprehension, and it was quite evident that students with low reading ability had considerably less difficulties in understanding literary texts than ordinary prose texts. Undoubtedly at least part of the explanation is that literary texts - or rather students reading texts which are regarded as literary - already in the initial stages of the reading process produce meaning qualities and structural configurations, which are strong enough to build up and hold together a unified and *total* experience of the kind I have illustrated in the preceding pages. They are also strong and *engaging* enough to help weak readers to fill out gaps and overcome other kinds of difficulties in their creation of meaning when reading the texts.

In the reading of ordinary prose texts, such gaps and difficulties might make it impossible to follow the logical argument, to see the assumptions leading up to the final conclusion, or to perceive the connection between different parts of the text. In this way literary texts are often more effective from a communication point of view, since they use - in the sense that they invite readers to use - simpler but stronger means of communication than ordinary prose texts do. In ordinary prose texts the exact meaning of a few key words or the correct analysis of a complicated sentence structure is often crucial for a full understanding of a description or an argument.

Creating Meanings, and Describing Them

The meanings of a literary text are not there on the printed page to be discovered and recognized by the readers. Every single meaning and every other quality which is present in the understanding of a literary text is *created* by the individual reader, taken out of his or her mind and combined with many other qualities in the reading process. Naturally, readers will have different resources in this respect: they have different linguistic backgrounds, they have different life experiences, and, depending among other things on how much exposure to literature they have had and how much training in reading literature they have had, they have different abilities to use the printed words to evoke the linguistic and experiential assets which they actually have in their minds.

The meanings and other qualities that have been evoked in the primary reading process must be organized and structured into larger meaning units. The text is there to guide and give reference points, but the reader is still the active partner: he or she has to be the organizer, to see the connections between different parts, and to accept or reject the many possibilities occurring in his or her mind. Again, individual differences as well as group differences, depending on background, basic resources, and training, will be of vital importance for the creation of structure and coherence in what has been evoked in the reading process. Although the text provides many signals and clues also in this respect, the reader's knowledge of what can and cannot be expected from a poetic or literary text, of strategies that can be used to organize data in one's mind, or of hypotheses to be tested in relation to the text as well as to the reader's life experience, is at least as important.

When a satisfactory and durable organization of the reading experience has been achieved, the next step for the reader is to try to make himself conscious of what the organization is which he has created in his mind: what the impact of it is, why it has moved him so deeply or left him indifferent, what in his previous life experience it is related to, what words would be adequate to describe it or at least point out is contours, etc. This is the stage where a new linguistic process is started, a process which goes in the opposite direction, partly parallel with but also growing out of the process in which the words printed on the page get their meanings. Now the reader is searching for and trying out first concepts and then words, descriptive phrases, images, metaphors, and symbols which are felt to be adequate in relation to what the reader has seen, felt, or grasped in his mind while reading the text. This searching for concepts and trying out words and phrases will probably remain incomplete and tentative in many cases, but that does not necessarily mean that what was seen, felt, or grasped by the reader was also incomplete or vague. The illustrations which I have quoted on the previous pages should be evidence enough of this.

Not always but quite often readers of literature want to communicate their understandings and interpretations to others, either orally or in writing. Sometimes they are requested to do so, as they are in the classroom or when they are test subjects in empirical research. This is the stage in which the reversed linguistic process is being fully developed: virtually at a distance the reader is then looking back upon his or her reading, upon the meanings he has created and upon the structuring he or she has given them. The conscious aim is to try to find descriptive and analytic words which will make it possible for other people to understand what he or she as a reader has understood. In its more developed forms - as in

essays and formal analyses printed in books and journals - this is a highly complex form of communication, using an acquired specialist language, partly a metalanguage, which only a selected group of people can master. In its less developed forms - as in informal talking or weekly papers in schools - it is a means for training the capacity to discern more and finer qualities and dimensions in one's own readings and to communicate them to others.

The four stages I have mentioned here should not be thought of as isolated stages, one strictly following the other in the reading process. Undoubtedly they roughly cover a temporal sequence in what readers are doing when they create meanings in literary texts. More important, however, is that they are stages in a continuous process in which they are more or less overlapping each other, the mind zigzagging between them rather than moving in a straight line from one to the other. Tentative verbalizations, for instance, will certainly occur already in the beginning of the reading process, and structuring or restructuring will continue into the verbalization stage, sometimes even as an effect of the efforts to find adequate descriptive words.

However, if the implications of these four stages are not carried too far, they may be used as a kind of frame for the observations which I have illustrated in this paper. *Understanding* a literary work is not only occurring in the stages where descriptive or analytic words and phrases are produced, and it is not limited to what can be communicated by such words and phrases. Understanding also occurs earlier in the reading process, when the words on the page are given meanings, which are structured and organized into larger meaning units, the essence or import of which is grasped and often deeply valued by the reader. Understandings of the latter kind do not occur with every reader or with every type of text, but they do occur often enough to be of great interest for teachers and researchers alike.

Teachers who are interested not only in what their students can verbalize but also in what they have actually understood while reading a piece of literature, will find it rewarding to try to find out what has taken place in the minds of the students while they were reading. There are several worth while tasks for knowledgeable and cautious teachers in the earlier stages of the reading process: helping students create more meanings, helping them structure these meanings, assisting them in making and testing *hypotheses* for structuring and interpreting created meanings, enlarging their store of strategies and verbal tools for interpretation and evaluation, systematically developing the descriptive, interpretive, analytic, and evaluative language which the students have not yet acquired, etc.

The natural curiosity of response researchers will invite them to try to find out about and explain mechanisms and functions in all stages of the reading process. The nature of an understanding which is clearly grasped and deeply felt and yet incompletely covered by descriptive words stands out as rather a challenge. How and under what circumstances such understandings are created, and how they can be registered and analyzed are attached challenges.

My own interest in these aspects of the reading process grew out of an occupation with some problems of interpretation in literature. When literary critics write in their essays and analyses for instance that while there is a strong tragic mood in the first part of the poem, there is a streak of joy coming up the middle part, or that gloominess in the first stanza and delight in the second are mixed in the third, it is evident that they are not referring to what occurred in the mind of the author of the poem. (Besides having been out of fashion for some time,

critical statements with such references would amount to committing *the intentional fallacy*.) Most critics would claim that they are writing about *the text* and that they are referring to their own reading of the text, or at least to somebody's reading. (Here some critics would protest vehemently, saying that this would amount to committing *the affective fallacy*; which would not bother the response researcher, however, since he knows better.)

Having arrived at this position, it is easy for a response researcher to ask if there are possibilities to find out whether meanings, qualities, or structural configurations which critics have found *in* particular poems (i.e., in their readings of these poems) could also be found in the readings of different groups of people. In my own thinking the use of verbal scales, similar to those worked out by Charles Osgood and his colleagues (Osgood, 1957), seemed to be a promising possibility. The standard set of scales, often called the semantic differential, would not be the best alternative, however, for the simple reason that this was a standardized set, explicitly intended to register *general* dimensions in people's use of language. In the case of literature, and particularly of course in the case of poetry, *particular* dimensions would be of much greater interest. Thus, scales directly derived from dimensions used by the critics in their interpretations and analyses seemed to be more promising. Put in another way, statements made by the critics would be used as *hypotheses* concerning meanings in other people's readings.

This was done in a first study (Hansson, 1964) using a Swedish poem which was divided into a number of sections, each being a complete meaning-carrying unit (apart, of course, from their relations to the other sections). A series of 25 scales was constructed, some of them taken from the original Osgood set, but most of them derived from statements made by critics. The scales were of the original bipolar, 7-point type, with a *neutral* point in the middle. Three groups of readers, widely different in respect to reading experience, training in literature, and level of formal education, were asked to judge each successive sector of the poem on the whole series of scales.

The three groups of readers did not find it difficult to use the scales, and the results demonstrated without doubt that the scales helped the readers to observe and also judge subtle meaning dimensions, which many of them, particularly in the groups with least training in reading, could hardly have described or discussed in written protocols. Even more surprising, however, was that the three groups of readers, in spite of the great differences in education and reading experience, made almost the same observations and judgments on the scales. This indicates that the readers in all three groups had been able to create and organize understandings of the poem, in which they could discern many of the often quite subtle meanings which the critics had discussed in their analyses. As can be seen in Figure 3, the *profiles* derived from the means of the judgments made by the members of the three groups, follow each other very closely. The only exceptions were a few scales registering formal qualities (like simple - complex). These scales are not applicable directly to linguistic qualities, but rather to configurations or functions of such qualities, which may make them more dependent on training to be observed.

In a later series of studies (Hansson, 1974) a scale instrument was used in combination with written protocols. Four different poems were studied, and the scales had been modified: instead of bipolar seven-point scales a unipolar type with seven points and a box for *not relevant* outside the scale was used. In this case the scales were derived from "hypotheses" which in their turn were derived from statements by teachers, who had been asked to describe their experiences from using the four poems in their teaching. The readers were students from

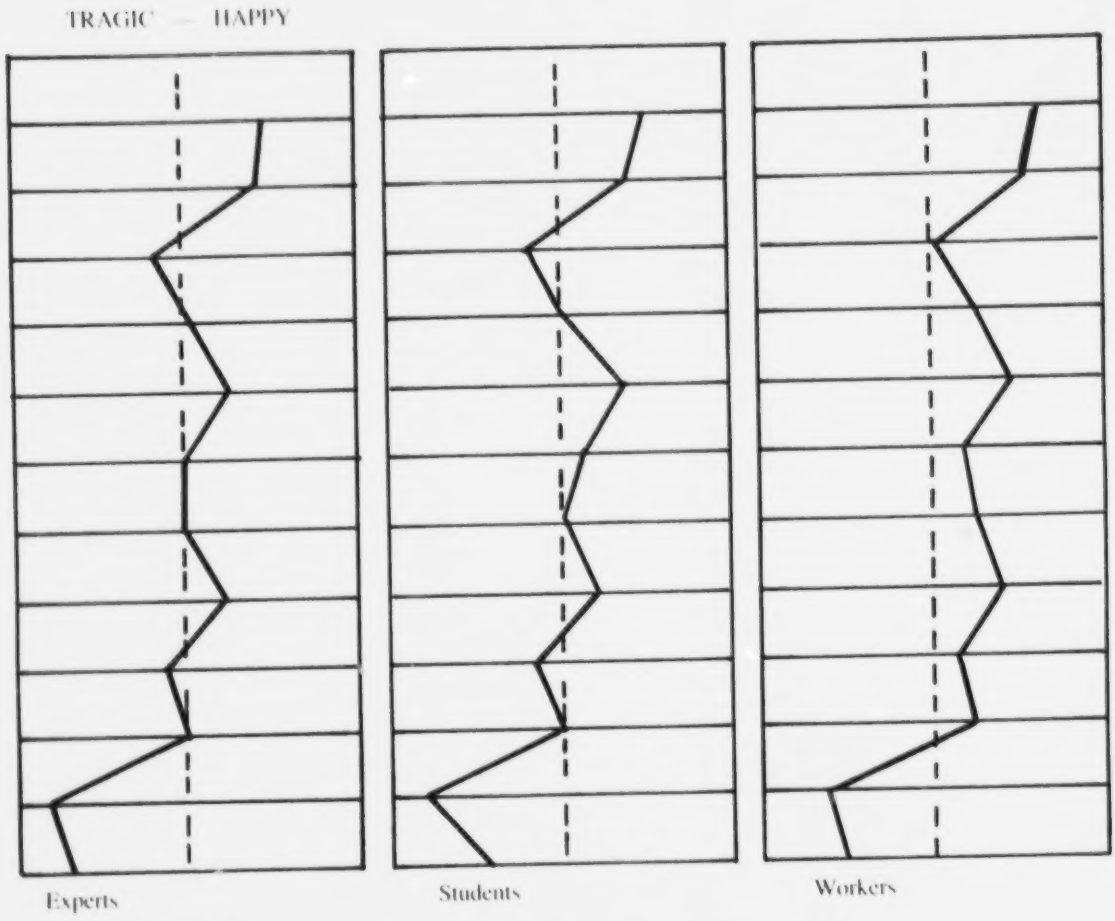


Figure 3. Means for three groups of readers on the scale TRAGIC–HAPPY.

three different levels of the educational system: the compulsory school (age 16), the gymnasium (age 18), and the university (age 20-25), studying literature.

Again, the same remarkable correspondence in the scale profiles for the three groups of readers came out in the results of the studies (Figure 4). And again this indicates that in spite of wide differences in age, formal education, and reading experience, the three groups of readers had very similar ability to create meanings in the initial stages of the reading process, and also to organize and observe these meanings when using the scales. When later on they were asked to describe and interpret the poems in written protocols, the similarities were not at all the same, however. The differences between the three groups were great and of kinds which are well-known from other studies using written protocols. The younger students with the least training in the reading and analysis of literature often wrote just one or two sentences which provided incomplete information about their understanding, while older students with more training could produce small essays with detailed descriptions and coherent interpretations. The older students had learned how to use descriptive and often quite expressive language to communicate their understanding, but the younger students seemed to fumble around with insufficient words, although their brief comments sometimes indicated that they had actually reached some kind of understanding. In comparison with the scaled responses the written protocols easily led to the conclusion that such protocols are insufficient and perhaps also unreliable indicators of meaning and understandings that readers have been able to create and observe in the primary reading process.

Verbal scales are probably just one of several methods that should be tried in the efforts to reach such early understandings, which to some extent - or sometimes surely to a large extent - remain unformulated, and which, therefore, also remain unrecognized. Other promising methods may already be at hand, and others may be invented by resourceful persons. Readers answering carefully directed questions with brief intervals during the first readings of texts may be one example. Readers indicating when a clear understanding of the text or a particular part of it has been reached, followed by an interview about what the understanding is like, may be another example. Various projective methods, drawing pictures which *describe* the understanding, or even registering bodily reactions while persons are reading or listening to a text, might be worth trying.

Kinds of Understanding, Kinds of Difficulties

The illustrations I have given here should have made it clear that synthetic and incompletely verbalized understandings run the risk of being overlooked, in teaching as well as in research. Teachers may never discover them in the classroom, since they are listening for other categories of understanding, and researchers may just put them aside, since they do not match their prearranged criteria for classification. Both teachers and researchers may concentrate on the more fully verbalized understandings, particularly if both are dressed in the kind of fluent critical language and full-fledged analytical terms, which they recognize as their own language. This is an acquired language, however, and much effort is being devoted in universities and higher levels of schools to mediate it to members of new generations. Not all such members are living under conditions which allow them to acquire this language, and not all find that language necessary to do so even if they could. And yet many are continuously reading literature and finding great pleasure in doing so. It is more than likely that they go on doing it because they are understanding what they are reading, although they are more or less

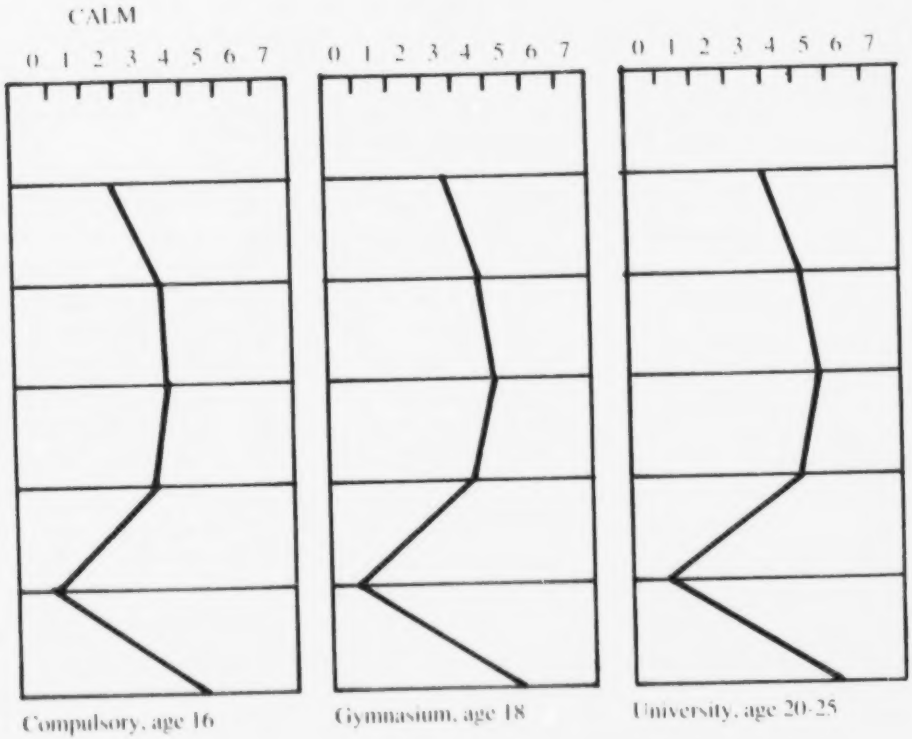


Figure 4. Means for three groups of readers on the scale CALM.

lacking the discursive language to describe their understandings. Once the full range of meaning creating activities has been seen clearly and demonstrated, it will probably be hard to maintain that a description in discursive and analytic language is necessary for understanding to have occurred in the mind of a reader of literature.

Clearly, what should be called understanding in the reading of literature may take place at different stages or levels of the reading process. Fully verbalized descriptions, analyses, and evaluations are one way of obtaining information about these understandings. Primarily, however, they are reports from the final stage of the reading process, and although the kind of understanding that has occurred in the earlier stages may be revealed in such reports, this will in most cases happen indirectly and perhaps incidentally. Other means, like verbal scales, multiple choice instruments, or directed questions, may be better and more direct ways for the researcher to reveal other levels or depths of understanding. In teaching situations, when there are no written reports, awareness of the different stages of the reading process, a sensitive ear, and an open mind will help teachers to discover more and perhaps deeper understandings than those produced by the most eloquent students in the classroom.

The results which I have used as illustrations indicate that difficulties in reading literature may be of several kinds depending on the stage of the reading process in which they manifest themselves. Generally, the results indicate that many difficulties should be located in the ability of the readers to formulate a response that matches the expectations and the criteria of teachers and researchers, rather than in the ability of the readers to create and organize meanings into coherent structures. In such cases the difficulties are not primarily in the reading process but in the process of resymbolization, i.e., in the process where what has been understood in a person's reading of a text has to be dressed in new concepts and new words. And, it might be added, preferably what has been understood should be dressed in words and concepts which are in accord with the norms of people who represent the society of the literarily educated.

The results also indicate, however, that there are other kinds of difficulties for the researcher to study and for the teacher to help the students overcome than those that can be observed in a verbalized response. Some readers will have difficulties already in the initial stage of the reading process, when they use the text to produce a wealth of meanings. Particularly with condensed and complicated texts, many of these meanings will be discarded later on or be kept floating in the background. Both the capacity to produce enough meanings and to choose among those that have been produced will vary, depending on many circumstances: the individual's experience with the use of language and with various branches of reality, for instance. It is certainly a capacity that can be trained and developed, both generally and in its more specific applications in the reading of literature.

Other readers, although they may be quite good at producing meanings, will have difficulties in their efforts to organize these meanings into larger units. These units have to be congruent not only with the text and the many signals that can be found there, but also with the individual reader's life experience. The structuring of such units is a highly complicated task, particularly for the less experienced readers. Knowledge of norms and conventions that are practiced in the world of literature is one of several prerequisites for their efforts to be successful.

Still other readers will have difficulties in finding paths from the structures they have organized, or from the insights they have gained through these structures, to the verbal resources which they have to use in order to clarify in discursive language - to themselves or to others - what they have seen or felt in their reading. This is where the more coherent verbalization of the understanding of the literary text is being started, and for most readers it is a long way to go and there are many difficult steps to practice from the initial stage of the reading process.

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